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SUBJECT: UNMEE FUEL UPDATE

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: UNMEE Force Commander Major General Mohammad Taisir (protect) estimates UNMEE can continue operations at the current reduced levels until January 31. After that UNMEE would have to dip into its strategic fuel reserve, which Taisir said is only sufficient to move UNMEE's troops back to Asmara. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Fuel Until January 31

UNMEE Force Commander Taisir told the ambassador January 11 that UNMEE has fuel sufficient to operate at the current reduced level only until January 31. The government of Eritrea has not responded to UNMEE's repeated requests for its normal deliveries of fuel. Further, Taisir said that an UNMEE proposal to use its trucks to import fuel from Sudan has gone unanswered. Other UNMEE sources say UNMEE vehicles continue to refuel in Ethiopia, but that the Eritreans refuse to allow UNMEE vehicles to return with jerry cans or other extra fuel containers.

¶3. (C) No Generalized Fuel Shortage

A/DCM noted over a dozen loaded fuel trucks plying the Massawa - Asmara road January 12-13, many of which were Eritrea Defense Force vehicles. There is no shortage of fuel (apart from diesel) in Asmara at present and gas stations are operating normally.

¶4. (C) Embassy Asmara's Assistance Sought

UNMEE's Asmara-based political head, Dr. Lebohang Moleko (protect), sent the ambassador a message January 13 asking for Post intervention with Eritrean authorities to relieve this fuel shortage. Excerpts from the message of the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General to the ambassador follow:

At the moment we are at a very critical stage. Our operations have had to be scaled down, but this is not the biggest concern. What is most worrying is fuel to run our refrigerators and communications; ...serious problems with perishables such as food and blood in our clinics, etc. I have suggested (to Eritrean authorities) that we be given permission to bring fuel from our Mission in Sudan, but so far we have had no response. I would like to ask for your

assistance if you can be able to talk to someone who can make a more reasonable decision (than from UNMEE's military liaison). Your help would be welcomed.

15. (C) Comment: While Major General Taisir was careful not to opine on any possible political motive for the Eritrean restriction of UNMEE fuel supplies, he did finally allow that the shortage "did not appear to be logistical in nature." Most observers here suspect the government of Eritrea is choking UNMEE in advance of the mandate renewal discussion to ratchet up pressure on the international community to force, in the GSE's view, Ethiopia to abide by the EEBC border ruling. End Comment.

MCMULLEN